
Citation:

Carless, D (2017) It's a leap of faith, writing a song. Departures in Critical Qualitative Research. ISSN 2161-9115 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2017.6.2.104>

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RUNNING HEAD: It's a Leap of Faith

It's a Leap of Faith, Writing a Song

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Forthcoming in: *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*

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Abstract

In this article I offer stories and reflections around my experiences of writing songs as a way of doing arts-based and performative research. In particular, I explore how we, as an academic community, respond to each other's critical, reflexive work. I write to stimulate reflection and discussion among readers about how best to – and how *not* to – respond to these forms of scholarship. I invite readers to consider the effects of their responses in terms of potential effects on the researchers themselves, but also on the survival and development of critical arts-based and performative methodologies.

Keywords: arts-based research, criticism, personal narrative, performative research, songwriting

It's a Leap of Faith, Writing a Song

Building Faith

Although I couldn't have known it at the time, she was in the final year of her life. Her husband of more than fifty years had died three years ago and, since then, she had visited us more frequently. For the ninety-mile trip from South Wales, she preferred the rickety little three-carriage train, which stopped at every little station, over the faster Intercity which required a change at Bristol. Her way took twice as long, but it saved switching to another train and allowed more time for conversations with other passengers.

At 19, 20 years old, I couldn't comprehend what it might be like to have lived with the same person for half a century and then, suddenly, to be left alone. I struggled to imagine how it would be, firstly, knowing another so thoroughly and, secondly, trying to carry on in the same house after he was no longer around. Over those few years, we became closer, my grandmother and I, talking together during her visits and coming to know each other better than we had before. These were the circumstances that surrounded Lil and my sharing of song.

It had been a couple of years since I'd started learning to play the guitar. And nearly a couple of years since I'd started writing songs. From the start, my songs were never secrets. I'd formed a rough and ready band with two friends and once a week we'd get together to play my songs, their songs and other people's songs. Right before my eyes and ears the songs would grow – in volume, density, depth and scale – with the addition of percussion, bass, harmonica, keyboard, extra vocals or electric guitar. They grew too – and I could feel this – through the sheer addition of other people's energy, commitment, passion and enthusiasm.

As marvellous and exciting as this was, I'm not sure anyone ever *listened* to my songs. Did we, as band-mates, ever really *hear* what the singer was singing? Or what the writer had written? If we did, we never talked about it. If there was analysis or interrogation, it was over the form, not the content. And perhaps this was part of the attraction of a band: the scale and scope of the sound – the *form* of the music – could be a distraction from lyrical *content* that often explored territories I might have preferred to keep to myself. But song writing, in my experience, doesn't allow the luxury of privacy. So when you share your songs, you share your self. And when others hear a song, they have an opportunity to hear a self.

At home, my playing, writing and primitive recording took place behind a closed door. My great-grandmother had been a piano teacher, but since then no-one in my extended family had played a musical instrument. Aside from my friends in the band, I didn't personally know anyone who wrote songs. In my family, music was something other people did – and songwriting was something that songwriters did. It wasn't something *we* did. So when I played, I would never have thought to play to or with my family. And I don't think they would have thought to listen or join in. Someone might walk into the room when I was singing a song, but they would behave as if I was watching a television programme – perhaps asking a question and waiting for a mid-song response. It was almost as if singing and playing music was something separate, that took place in a parallel world.

So although my writing may have been an attempt to communicate something to someone, the playing was never a sharing and nobody was expected to listen. And I can't say I blame anyone for *not* listening – listening again to my early recordings now, I gain little in the way of aural pleasure. So when Lil asked if I'd sing her some of my songs, one mid-week afternoon when no-one else was around, it came as a bit of a shock.

“I’m not sure they’d be your taste Gran,” I replied, stalling, looking for a way out, and thinking of songwriter Billy Bragg’s testament that *the point of writing pop songs is to make music your parents don’t like!* How on earth, then, could my grandmother possibly like my songs? And what if she did? Would that mean my music was hopelessly middle-of-the-road or out of touch with the times?

“Perhaps you’d give me the chance to decide?” Lil replied. “I’d like that.”

So I did. And she listened. She sat in the armchair, head rested back, watching me intently, closing her eyes occasionally. And she really did *listen*. I don’t know what she was listening to or for – but she found something worth hearing in the embryos I had cobbled together. It was the first time, I think, that my songs were really *heard* by another person.

I don’t remember us saying much between songs. She’d ask me to play another, which I’d do. We shared seven or eight songs, maybe more. She didn’t say, “That’s good” or “That’s bad.” She didn’t judge or critique. She didn’t analyse, interrogate, question or deconstruct. She didn’t make suggestions for improvements or point out what was missing. She didn’t, as far as I can recall, applaud. She just listened ... and I believe she truly heard.

The next time I tried to sing ‘with’ my grandmother was at her funeral, at a crematorium in South Wales. This time, I was not singing my own songs, I did not have my guitar and I was not singing solo. This time, the songs were hymns selected for the occasion, sung by many people many times before. And this time a roomful of family, acquaintances and strangers were trying to sing them too. But these were not songs that *I* could really sing ... to Lil or to anyone else. They just didn’t fit somehow.

It wasn’t until several years later that my Dad told me of the conversation he’d shared with Lil, his mother, between our song sharing and her dying. “Gran told me she listened to you play one afternoon,” he said, “that you’d sung her some of your songs. ‘He’s got

something there, that son of yours,’ she told me. It was important to her, that afternoon, son.”
It was important to me too.

Dismantling Faith

She had presented her research as I had seen her do so many times before – engaging, passionate, insightful, humane and wise. This time it was also funny in places. In other places, she revealed some of her vulnerability and uncertainties. This was no ‘flawless performance.’ Instead, she talked about work in progress: about the personal and ethical challenges of completing a commissioned study in a short time period, of meeting contractual obligations yet doing research that was respectful, significant, that might make a positive difference somehow. There were students in the audience. They need, she said, to hear accounts of when things don’t go smoothly, to understand that even published scholars struggle with the tensions and demands of doing good social research.

When she finished, I stood and faced the audience, thanked her, and invited responses, questions or discussion. The first response was a sharing of how what she had said led this individual to think back on a partner who’d been lost as a result, he felt, of his own single-mindedness, his dedication to his sport. Now, years later, he shared with us his regret and sadness over that loss, musing whether things could have been different if he’d behaved differently. The next response was a question about how clients – funders of research – might feel about findings that include the researcher’s experiences in an open, reflexive and transparent way. “*Should* we include ourselves and our difficulties in commissioned studies,” he asked, “is that what our clients want?” Next came a statement, a judgement perhaps: “I’m amazed the ethics committee approved this, allowing the funder to identify potential

participants.” Another audience member rightly silenced this point: “The only ethical problem,” he said, “would be if this wasn’t acknowledged in the report. That is not the case with this study, which I think provides fascinating and useful insights.”

But by this stage the second and third responses had got under my skin somehow. Why was I feeling annoyed? What was my problem with these responses? Or is it these *ways* of responding? Should I speak up – help deal with the remarks fielded at her? What might I say in response to comments which, on the face of it, could appear reasonable enough even though something about them felt entirely wrong?

Afterwards, although I’d noticed it too, she was the one who voiced it: “Funny how all the questions came from men.” It was true – there were equal numbers of men and women in the audience, but no women had spoken. “I should have said more,” I offered, “to set the tone, to invite the audience to offer more open, reflexive, vulnerable responses.” *But what could I have said?* I thought back to colleagues and friends who had handled the role of Chair with more sensitivity and perhaps anticipation than I had myself. What had they said? How had they said it?

We talked some more, she and I. I began to figure out what I might have said and how I might have said it. Perhaps it would have gone something like this: “Thank you, Kitrina, for a fascinating, engaging and insightful presentation. I particularly want to thank you for your openness, courage and generosity in talking publicly about the kinds of vulnerabilities and uncertainties that we all experience yet which, more often than not, we hide away behind a veneer of ‘expert-ness,’ professionalism, proficiency – toughness even. What you have said today has caused me to reflect on the kind of front I sometimes construct and present in my writing and presentations – a flawless self, perhaps, which obscures my own doubts, insecurities, imperfections. I wonder if others in the room have also had these kinds of

experiences in their research? I think that would be a worthwhile focus for our discussion in the twenty minutes that remain.” *Would that have been enough?*

Responding to Stories, Songs and Selves

As in some previous work,^{1 2 3} I share the preceding stories in an effort to resist being constrained by a singular story: a monologue that scripts a certain way of responding to others’ scholarship. Arthur Frank⁴ calls this approach *dialogical research* and proposes that, “two stories are the beginning of *thinking*” because together they help guard against becoming “caught up in one story.” Two stories, he writes, “are necessary for thinking because each opens up a critical distance from the evocative intensity of the other.” To some readers, my two stories might appear only loosely connected to each other, if at all. That may be so. Yet placing these two stories side-by-side – in dialogue – helps me begin to understand and resolve the frustrations and discomfort (anger even) I feel facing moments like the second and third responses recounted in *Dismantling Faith*.

This partial resolution involves formulating a response to a question these stories raise for me: Does responding to each other’s performative or arts-based scholarship in a supportive, constructive and useful way require a relational orientation akin to a caring family relationship? Put another way, might it be helpful (in some ways at least) to hold in mind the image of a family when responding to each other’s work? I do not want to go as far as suggesting that academics/writers/social researchers ‘parent’ each other. Yet I would like to ask whether the kind of relational qualities my grandmother embodied in *Building Faith* might be beneficial and helpful when responding to each other’s reflexive, honest, vulnerable, creative research.

David Gilbourne⁵ uses the phrase “seek-out and destroy” to describe the mode of response exhibited by some academics when faced with scholarship which contravenes their own beliefs or expectations. In this mode of operation – the dominant one in much of academia I think – another’s work is questioned, deconstructed or entirely dismantled in the name of rigorous, critical scholarship. Some might argue this is an unproblematic and reasonable – even necessary – practice in scientific paradigms where distance, neutrality and objectivity are considered desirable; where there is (supposedly) a clear separation of one’s self and one’s research. But as others have suggested⁶ this way of being becomes acutely problematic when applied to reflexive forms of scholarship that openly incorporate the self – the author/researcher.

Ken Gale and Jonathan Wyatt⁷ reflect on how: “Writing is not simply a shell or a code which protects us or allows us to be identified in certain superficial ways; our writing is us.” This conceptualization of written work raises the possibility of *damage to the self* (the writer/researcher) through hostile responses from others. Perhaps it explains my desire to somehow protect Kitrina from the kinds of ‘wrong’ responses described in *Dismantling Faith*, and makes sense of my frustrations at being unable to find a way to do so. These kinds of responses, on reflection, seem to build barriers rather than bridges, attempting to reduce or belittle the work and, by implication, the openly vulnerable self that created it. One debilitating result can be alienation – separation and secrecy among and between us. In short, damage to relationships. In contrast, my grandmother’s responses to my songs (and my self) left me feeling that my work (and my self) was connected and worthy.

But it is not just the self (the creating, writing, performing scholar) that is put at risk through ‘seek-out and destroy’ response styles. To the extent that, as Gale and Wyatt⁸ suggest, “my writing ... is me becoming,” inappropriate, negative or hostile responses might

be said to constrain and limit the development of the individual scholar. With the benefit of hindsight, I can see that my grandmother's responses to my songs provided me with much-needed support for the continuation and development of my nascent songwriting practice. In my more recent song-based autoethnography and ethnography with Kitrina Douglas,^{9 10 11 12} ¹³ I have felt once more a need for similar kinds of response in the face of a social science community that can appear skeptical or hostile towards the use of songs as a form of academic research¹⁴. It is not just for my *self* that this support has been necessary; it is also for the continuation and development – the survival – of a novel, unusual and highly revealing methodology.

This kind of sensitivity and vulnerability is not unusual among songwriters¹⁵. The successful American songwriter Ricky Lee Jones offered this reflection on her own experience:

Since I became a professional, it's been hard for me not to critique my work while I'm doing it. And that can destroy it. 'Cause it really is a spirit being born. It's a living spirit. When people hear it, a spirit happens to them. And you have to be really quiet and careful with it when it's first being born, and you can't tell if it's wrong, 'cause it will just die. For me, they do. If before they're done I start to think something is wrong with them, they just won't get done.¹⁶

Here, the potentially damaging effect of the 'wrong response at the wrong time' on the development of the song (or the work or the scholarship) is apparent. These remarks illustrate how the wrong kind of response can also come from within; internalized, perhaps, through sustained immersion in a culture that favours critique and deconstruction.

So why might it be the case that responses to our work (particularly during early or creative phases of a project) are so powerful and potentially influential? The close and, for

me at least, unavoidable connection between my *self* and my *work* (particularly when it comes to songwriting, but also other creative forms) seems to be key here. When I share this work, I also unavoidably share aspects of my self that are much easier to obscure or keep hidden in traditional scholarship. Yet, over time, this ‘hiding’ has negative effects, both for the self and the work¹⁷, potentially subduing or denying reflexivity, openness and dialogue. And there is more. When the kinds of stories shared deviate from a culturally dominant meta-narrative (as they do in any work which offers a counter-narrative), the writer is placed – for a moment at least – in a place of separation from the majority who subscribe to the plot of that meta-narrative. At these times, I need to sustain a degree of hope for connection with others across difference. Or, at the least, I need to remain optimistic that others will be forthcoming in their openness, if not their understanding. If I fail in this task, the work simply will not happen. This means that it’s a leap of faith, writing a song.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Kitrina Douglas for generously sharing ideas, thoughts and encouragement which served as the stimulus for this work. Thanks also to Paul Zollo and Da Capo Press for kindly granting permission to quote from the interviews published in the book *Songwriters On Songwriting, Expanded Edition*.

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